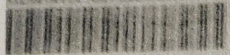


THE DEAD END

EXPLOSION OF

THE '70s IN WORDS AND PICTURE



R00940 95877

WHAT IT IS ...

WHAT IT WAS

TARANTINO • ISAAC HAYES • PAM GRIER •
HOOKS • FRED WILLIAMSON • RUDY RAY MOORE •
VORY WAYANS • WILLIAM MARSHALL • DAVID
TOWNSEND • ICE-T • MELVIN VAN PEEBLES •
D • GLORIA HENDRY • KEVIN HOOKS • JOHN
HUDLIN • SAMUEL L. JACKSON • QUENTIN
R • ROGER CORMAN • CAROL SPEED
OWN • MELVIN VAN PEEBLES •
WALT BEER •

GLYNN TURMAN • JOHN SINGLETON • JACK
WALKER • ARTHUR MARRS • CAROL SPEED
HASOOF ORMAN • ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON
HODIE • JACK • BRYCE DUNN • DAVID
ANDANTINO • JAMES • JOHN COLE
HILL •



MARTINEZ, DIANA MARTINEZ, and ANDRES CHAVEZ

Gerald Martinez is vice president and creative director for L.A. Media, a company that produces art to showcase films that are often overlooked. From a family of talented artists, he has produced art for Disney, including the movie *From Dusk Till Dawn*, and *Jackie Brown*. Martinez is launching the Rolling Thunder Book Division with the book *What It Was!*

Diana Martinez is an award-winning journalist. Martinez worked as an editor, producer, and news director before joining the communication company L.A. Media. An emphasis for L.A. Media is work that supports cultural understanding. Martinez produced the award-winning book *Covering L.A.'s Majority*, the first work to examine L.A.'s ethnic communities and media coverage. She produces *L.A. Stories* for KFWB CBS Newsradio.

Andres Chavez has worked as a producer and media manager for twenty-five years. Currently co-owner of L.A. Media, Chavez provides creative service to media and corporate clients. Prior to joining L.A. Media, Chavez was film director at KABC-TV in Los Angeles. He's an aficionado of world cinema. Chavez's other passions include his wife and son, arts, and science. He is a member of the Planetary Society.

Editors: Gerald Martinez, Diana Martinez, and Andres Chavez
Associate Editor: Jeri L. Love
Art Director/Designer: Gerald Martinez
Associate Designer: Mathieu Bitton

Cover illustration (*Cotton Comes to Harlem*) by: Robert E. McGinnis
Back cover illustration (*That Man Bolt*) by: John Solie

Copyright © 1998, Gerald Martinez, Diana Martinez, and Andres Chavez

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without the written permission of the Publisher. Printed in the United States of America. For information address: Hyperion, 114 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10003

The posters in this book are from the collection of Ron Finley.

Additional posters/ad material courtesy of: Mathieu Bitton

Photo Credits: Melvin Van Peebles - Chico De Luigi, Rimini, Italy; Cheryl Dunye - K. Brent Hill; Ice-T - Chris Cuffaro

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Bob Weinstein, Harvey Weinstein, Mark Gill, Julie McLean, Leith Adams, Brian Ashcraft, Darius James aka Dr. Snakeskin, Lydia Martinez, Alejandro M. Chavez, Josh Olson, Art Sims, Brian Quinn, Gabrielle Raumberger, Garo Nighossian, Frank Kim, Hama/Cullen Design, Nagata Design, Creative Photo Services, A Band Apart, Toby Chi, Larry Zerner, Lee Stollman, Rebecca Saifer, Bumble Ward, Carlos Goodman, David Ring, Austin Stoker, Ron Whitchko, John Kisch, Peter Saphier, E. Caidin—Hollywood Book & Poster, Shannon McIntosh, Ray Bentley, Donny and the Goblin Market, Steve Mitchell, New York Society of Illustrators, Rick Reece

Martinez, Gerald.

What it is, what it was! : the Black film explosion of the '70s in words and pictures / Gerald Martinez, Diana Martinez & Andres Chavez — 1st ed.

p. cm.

Filmography: p.

ISBN 0-7868-8377-4

1. Afro-Americans in motion pictures. 2. Afro-American motion picture producers and directors—Interviews. 3. Afro-American actors and actresses—Interviews. 4. Film posters, American.

I. Martinez, Diana. II. Chavez, Andres.

PN1995.9.N4M32 1998

791.4375'08996073—dc21

First Edition

98-20517

CIP

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



MELVIN VAN PEEBLES

Every film with an African-American theme made since 1971 owes a debt to Sweet Sweetback BaadAsssss Song. That seminal film was rejected by the Hollywood establishment but broke box office records all over the country. For the first time it showed a Black man winning against the White establishment; caught the accent, music, and spirit of the Black urban ghetto; proved that movies with Black themes and stars could be commercially successful. It started an era in the '70s of Black-oriented films, some of which were called blaxploitation.

Every Independent American filmmaker since 1971 owes a debt to Melvin Van Peebles, who wrote, directed, produced, and starred in Sweet Sweetback. He showed it was possible to create films outside the Hollywood establishment and make money. Sweet Sweetback is still on Variety's All-Time Top-Grossing Independent list. Filmmakers as diverse as Spike Lee and Quentin Tarantino have acknowledged Van Peeble's contribution.

At the time, in the early '60s, independent filmmakers were very, very far out . . . drastically. An independent film was experimental film. Most independent filmmakers were people who scratched on film and bloop . . . bloop . . . bloop, put little things like that on the sound track. They were all anti-Hollywood. Nobody was interested in telling stories. But all I wanted to do was tell stories. I made these three short films. I came to Hollywood, and of course, they threw me down the steps. I took my film and showed it to them, and they said, "Okay, we'll offer you a job." They offered me a job as an elevator operator. I said, "I want to write and direct." They said, "Whoa, whoa. Hey kid!" and they offered me a job as a dancer. So I went back to my second love, which is mathematics and astronomy. I moved to Holland to take my Ph.D. in astronomy. Through a series of events, this guy showed my short films to the Cinémathèque of France. They found out where I was and sent me a postcard in Holland and said, "Jesus, you should be in cinema absolutely." So I hitchhiked to France. They took my films and me in a limo to the Champs Elysées to a little private screening room and they showed my films. They oohed and ahhed and everything. They came down and everybody kissed me and drove off. There I stood in the middle of the Champs Elysées with three little cans of film, two wet sheets, and not a fucking penny to my name. Most people intimidate themselves by saying, "I'm gonna make it." I said, "I'm gonna make it or die in the attempt." So then you're not intimidated; it lets you off the hook. I don't believe right triumphs; it might, maybe. But, you gotta be in it to win it. So I became a beggar and taught myself French. You look at a situation and sell yourself cheap on a deal, if you're betting on yourself. I took the long shot. I became a crime reporter. I did a lot of the dirty work that nobody wanted to do. I had some scoops and then my novels began to get published. Along the way I found out that a French writer had the right to a temporary director's card. Aha! I went to the French Cinema Center. I had

really cased the joint like it was a bank robbery. The French are very difficult. If they make a decision, it's hard for them to back off. So I knew I had one fuckin' shot. They had just instituted the coffee break at 10:30 A.M. So I figured I'd go in right after the coffee break. They'll feel they'd gotten away with something because they just had a coffee break. I go in: "Why are you here?" "I'm here for my director's card. Look it says French writer, I write in French so I'm a French writer, right?" That's not what it meant but it said French writer. The guy looked at me and said, "Yeah." That's how I made my first feature, *Story of a Three Day Pass*.

In 1967, I won the San Francisco Film Festival Critic's Choice Award for *Story of a Three Day Pass*. When I went to San Francisco, I came as a French delegate. No one knew I was an American, let alone Black, so everyone freaked out. But they couldn't afford to have the only Black American director being a French director. So then Hollywood embraced me: "Oh, where have you been . . . blah, blah, blah." All the studios offered me a job, however I couldn't take the job, politically, because if I did, they would have had the one colored threat out of the way. "Oh, it's not that, he's a genius, not like the others . . . dadan, dadah, dadah." I didn't have a job. I ended up living on a park bench on tenth and Greenwich, near the Lion's Head in New York City. But I still refused.

The search was on for the great Black hope. It was at that juncture that Ossie Davis was "discovered." Ossie had been trying to get into films for years as a director. Then, Gordon Parks was "discovered." Gordon had beaucoup credits and he too had been trying for years. But suddenly, the arms opened to them. Gordon and Ossie had shot their films on location because they didn't dare have these Ubangees running around Hollywood. They were still pursuing me, so I said, "Okay, I'll come," because it was time for the next step. I said, "I'll shoot *Watermelon Man* if we shoot it in Hollywood," which they agreed to do. I felt it was the next political barrier to break down.

So I made *Watermelon Man*; there are a gazillion hilarious stories about that. This guy called me up and gave me the script. We've talked to some people, he mentioned Jack Lemmon, Alan Arkin, and they were trying to find just the right guy. I read the script. I called him and said, "I think you sent me the wrong script." He said, "What is it?"

"The guy's Black." "Yes, but he starts off white." "So get a Black guy to play it in white face." "Is that possible?" They were perfectly willing to get a white guy to play in black face but could a Black guy play a white man? They put me through all kinds of hell. Tests, this and that, makeup test. They gave me a lot of latitude out of . . . it didn't dawn on them that I might be cleverer than they were.

For example, in the original script, *Watermelon Man* ends with the guy having to get up in the middle of the night and then he's white again, it was all a bad dream. I said, "I don't find that ending acceptable." We're sitting around a room with a bunch of executives. What are you going to do? "We'll shoot it both ways. Okay, Mel, we'll do that and we'll see later on." They gave me twenty-three days to shoot *Watermelon Man*. They programmed me for failure. As soon as I realized they were trying to fuck me, I shot it in twenty-one days and I shot things all out of sequence, so they couldn't follow what I was doing, so they couldn't start fucking with me. I'll never forget it. About day twenty, the guys came down, "Mel, just came down to see how things are going. How many extra days are you going to need?" I said, "Didn't you get my card for the wrap party? Day after tomorrow." Then, during editing,

LA COLUMBIA PICTURES PRESENTA
FREY CAMBRIDGE - ESTELLE PARSONS



UNA PRODUZIONE BENNETT - MIRELL - VAN PEEBLES

L'UOMO A LATTATE

MAN RAUCHER
LEON MIRELL
IN VAN PEEBLES
MUSICA DI MELVIN VAN PEEBLES
PRODOTTO DA JOHN B. BENNETT
A COLORI



the guy calls me, "Mel, the other ending, we want to try that out to see how it works."

The other ending?, "Yeah, you know where he wakes up . . ." "Lawd have mercy, this colored boy done forgot to shot that part. Oh, lawd, I sorry Cap'n." Now their racism is saying, "Is this nigger fucking with us or something?" They didn't know which foot to jump on. I never shot the other side because you can believe it would have been the other way. Since they didn't give you credit for cleverness, it allowed me a latitude I wouldn't have had.

I do my homework and my homework told me that there was a huge, huge Black audience. But at the time there was the mindset that a Black film could never be a blockbuster. It could do all right but never do good. I said, "Hey, how would you guys know? You never made Black film." They're making *The Liberation of L.B. Jones* and *Lilies of the Field*. They said, "My maid likes it." I said, "She needs her job. She's gonna say she doesn't like it?" Fuck this.

I had a three-picture deal with Columbia, but I struck out on my own. I was paid \$70,000 for *Watermelon Man*. I ended up with \$72,000 because I kept all of my per diem too. The lab extended credit for the film and processing to me. I must be honest. I led them to believe that I was just shooting a little film for the girl I was trying to get next to. The equipment company gave me the equipment. A loan they said, we'll settle up later. Because when I do my next feature for Columbia, they wanted the business. So, that's how I did it. That's how I got *Sweetback* shot.

WATERMELON MAN

When I finished the film, at the very end, I ran out of money. Bill Cosby loaned me \$50,000 but he wouldn't take an equity share, "Just give me my money back." Nobody wanted a piece.

I went to the distributor, who said, "What do you want?" I said, "I want a million in front." He said, "A million, what do you mean? What did this cost you?" I said, "Wait a minute, when you buy a Picasso, you don't ask him what the chalk cost." He said, "Why so much?" "'Cause you're going to steal and I want to be able to sleep. Fuck you, I wanna be able to sleep." "Well, no Mel." So nobody would deal with me. There was a company that was in Chapter 11, Cinemation. I made a deal with Jerry Gross. After \$5 million, I get 50 percent. Up to that point, it was a 60/40 split. The guy fell on the floor laughing. He said, "Ok, you got it Mel." The day we were getting ready to finish the deal, I got the contract and the contract says, *Sweetback* formerly known as *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. "No, no, this is the title." "Well, I don't understand it." I says, "Who gives a shit?" You don't have to understand the title. People would say, "Mel, what's the title of the film?" *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. "Yea, but what are you really going to call it?" "I'm gonna call it *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*." "Yeah, right, you'll never get away with it." I bet people all over the country. The reason I spelled it, "*Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*," was so I could get the papers to run it, because they wouldn't run anything. The *New York Times* finally ran it and that's how I got away with it and why I did what I did.

Now *Time* Magazine, *Newsweek*, *New York Times* refused to even review the film. Not to say it was bad, they refused to review it. I decided I was gonna have to be up in your face, stay up in your face. Since I can't count on these people, I don't have to pander to them. That was the start of this whole Black esthetic.

How am I going to advertise the film if I don't have any money? Okay, Black people like music, I'll write a hit song. I wrote a song; in fact, I wrote the whole score. Music was not used as a selling tool in movies at the time. Even musicals, it would take three months after the release of the movie before they would bring out the album. I had this whole marketing idea to use the music to sell the movie. I taught this process to a company called Stax Records. We did so well with this unknown group, Earth Wind and Fire. It was their first album. MGM got so taken by this, they hired the Stax people to bring out their next one, which was *Shaft* with Issac Hayes. That became the whole stencil for using the soundtrack as a marketing tool. Before that Black movie, "*Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*," it hadn't been a marketing tool. After that comes the posters or conceptual advertisement. I knew what I wanted, so I designed the conceptals all myself.

Black films were never shown first run. I demanded that my film be shown first run. Anyway, with all these demands, etc., etc., etc., only two theaters in the United States would show the film. The Grand Circus theater in Detroit and the Cornet in Atlanta, Georgia. The first night, a Wednesday, it broke the record at The Grand Circus in Detroit. *Sweet Sweetback* became the most successful independent film ever released, up to that time.

Sweetback, I considered a very, very revolutionary film. The Black Panther party even required all its members to go see it. However there are aspects of it that can be taken and subverted and it begot the blaxploitation movie.

The film was so successful that everybody jumped on the bandwagon. The original *Shaft* was a white guy. So when I made all this money, they threw in a couple of "mother fucks," found a Black guy, and made themselves a Black detective. That's what happened. They took away the political content, the revolutionary aspect, in such a way as to be counterrevolutionary.

On a profound level, Hollywood was in a bind, they wanted the money but they didn't want the message. So, they still kept the Bwana syndrome. *Shaft* was allowed to be flamboyant and do little things. *Foxy Brown* and so forth, but in each case they still had a higher white authority over them. *Cleopatra Jones* was a narcotics agent, so Bwana big daddy, *Shaft* argues with the police commissioner, who gave him a little leeway. "You've got your unorthodox ways, *Shaft*, but you're getting the right thing done." The subliminal message still is the Bwana syndrome.

People sometimes point to *Superfly* as an example of someone escaping the ghetto on his own terms. But you see, on your own terms, without a larger sentiment, is in many ways counterrevolutionary. For example, in the beginning Sweetback was *Superfly* in many ways. After he helped the young activist, the kid said, "What do we do now?" and Sweetback said, "Where do you get that we shit?" But through a series of steps, he realized how he was being used by the system. The first high point was when the guy said, "I can't carry two of you on the motorcycle," and Sweetback says, "Take him, he's our future." Which is the political message of the thing.

I found I was in despair for a while, for a number of years because I felt, Didn't anybody get my message? There were no people immediately after me because they didn't have the infrastructure and they had already been taught they couldn't do it. It was like when somebody broke the four-minute mile, the guys who came before him and immediately after couldn't break it because they were taught that it couldn't be done. But a little further along, boom, the guy said, the four-minute mile, yeah, you can do it. It's so important, the liberation of the mind.

Spike Lee called me the Godfather of modern Black films. That's all fine and people say "Melvin is this what you would have done?" No, I wouldn't have done any of those films. Mario's (Van Peebles, my son) work is not what I would do. I like Spike, I like Singelton, I like Townsend, the Hudlin brothers. I go see all their stuff. Is it my sensibility? No, but I didn't want clones. I just want them to write, to have the opportunity to be who they are and what they are. Color is not monolithic either nor does it have to be.